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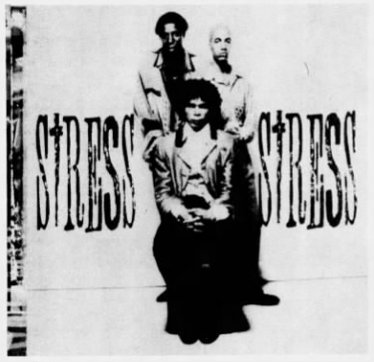

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RALPH PETERSON PRESENTS THE FO'TET (Blue Note)
DAVID MURRAY Deep River (DIW)

The trend in jazz now is to be cool and restrained and wear a suit. Nothing wrong with a nice suit, but the restrained bit is getting out of hand. Seems the kids don't want to get sweat stains on their white shirts. Of hard-blowing, free-improvising, emotional jazz, Richard Meltzer says, "Catch it now, 'cause it's just about over with." Hope not. Making statements to the contrary: musicians from the '70s extreme generation still blowing and starving, such as reedman David Murray, and open minds from the late '80s who won't stand still for their memorial portraits, such as drummer Ralph Peterson. These dudes still know how to get excited, and both are on exhibit here today, Y'r Honor.

Peterson keeps improving, and this Fo'tet thing, with clarinetist Don Byron, vibist Bryan Carrott and bassist Melissa Slocum (add Murray and trombonist Frank Lacy on three tracks), is his best yet. Everybody composes, and damn well. Slocum's "Miss Lady," for example, shows how to write a riff tune without just having everybody blare in unison or in simple fourths, each note has its own harmony, assigned with the feel of each instrument in mind. And when you hear the ghostly combination of vibes and clarinet on most cuts, you start to wonder why you have to think back to Eric Dolphy or Archie Shepp with Bobby Hutcherson in the '60s to find anything at all like it. Byron squonks righteously on bass clarinet, is surgically sensitive on the B-flat model, and stands up strong next to Murray's tenor when Murray busts a turn. And Peterson . . . the man is incorrigible. He thumps, tumbles, plays quiet on the fast ones, loud on the slow ones, does everything but keep a straight beat, and, like Blakey did, he makes it work. You've gotta laugh.

Deep River was recorded a couple years earlier (recently made more widely available by DIW), and Peterson is a little closer to what they call "the drummer" on it, but he gives it a white-water rush anyway. This is a quartet too, of the more common sax-piano-bass-drums variety, and Murray's tenor and bass clarinet bristle with that familiar Trane Lives explosive expressiveness. Dave Burrell on piano does his best with his around-the-barn lines to make you forget McCoy Tyner, and succeeds. The moments that really stick, though, come when Murray duets with ex-Air bassist Fred Hopkins, who on "Dakar Dance" makes more out of one note than anybody since Monk on "Thelonious." The tune's use of space (Fo'tet's hallmark tool) is a revelation. Same goes for the concluding number, "Deep River," which starts as free duo interplay between Murray's bass clarinet and the squeaking, huffing bowed bass of Hopkins before unexpectedly moving into an ensemble statement of the churchy melody. What a strange way to be saved. (Greg Burk)

PERFORMANCE

THE GIRL OF THE GOLDEN WEST at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion June 12

I've always wondered how Japanese opera buffs feel when seeing *Madame Butterfly*, do they recognize their culture or country as filtered through the Italian eyes of Puccini? Perhaps an inkling is provided by the production of the original spaghetti Western, Puccini's *The Girl of the Golden West*. Given the opportunity, I discovered something unaccounted for: that this current offering from the Los Angeles Music Center Opera would turn out to be so well, *believable*.

Smogless sunsets and saloons that ingeniously functioned equally well as exterior or interior sets were only the most obvious contributions of director Harold Prince, designers Eugene and Franne Lee, and lighting designer Ken Billington. High praise must be accorded as well to a miners' chorus and other supporting parts that consistently lent an atmosphere in which the suspension of disbelief became an easy task. Fortunately the ring of truth was reflected in the ring of high notes: principals Placido Domingo and Gwyneth Jones provided plenty of requisite *Italianate* passion, and then some.

While the work itself makes one wait for Domingo's protagonist Dick Johnson to appear, patience is indeed a virtue in this staging. Based on the vocal evidence of this night, the company's titular artistic consultant possesses no shortage of great singing. Always above average as an actor, Domingo rose to the considerable requirements of the score, while fleshing out his character with an easy affability. Jones' Minnie matched Domingo musically and theatrically, once she overcame a first-entrance wobbly vibrato. From then on, she gathered strength, and in her first go-round with this pistol-packin' pioneer of a role, appropriately called to mind her Wagnerian vocal background.

Only Justino Diaz, as Sheriff Rance, fell a short notch below his colleagues; in Act 1 in particular he seemed to struggle to be clearly heard over the enlarged L.A. Chamber Orchestra. But since there was marked improvement in the remainder of the work, one is inclined to place a portion of the blame at the hands of conductor Richard Buckley. While the orchestra was equal to the challenge of the sumptuous score, they frequently threatened to overpower the singers.

But when all is said and sung, the lasting memories are of glorious vocal displays against picture post-card backdrops. One could have forgiven a glitch in the supertitles this time even if they had flashed, "Wish you were here." (Greg Hettmansberger)

MUSIC REVIEWS

Current Releases (cont.)

• Thing," the revived T-Neck's first release, laid the groundwork for more than a decade's worth of hits by what became black music's most enduring self-contained group. At the height of the disco years, the Isleys made great dance records that weren't stock disco, and when funk reigned supreme, they cut rhythmically unforgiving sides which they then tempered with sweet harmonies. *Story* finally pays them their due, and, given the white audience's propensity for learning to love the toughest and most original black music a decade or two after its heyday, there's even a good chance that this time around, more people will be listening. (JM)

PERE UBU Worlds in Collision (Mercury/PolyGram)

This is basically a relationship album — a record about a broken heart, what singer David Thomas calls "a summer of lies," and his own doomed quest to "live like them people in love who I see advertised." Not surprisingly, he fails — but just that someone as grossly intelligent as Thomas even tried is sad enough to merit an entire album's musings. Thomas' passion almost makes one uneasy, his voice and words (and even the title of one tune) filled with that bane of editors and high school English teachers, exclamation points. His vocal punctuation is, however, heartfelt, maybe even inadvertent; it gives a naiveté to the songs that well becomes the otherwise mechanically accurate, serious, arty nature of Pere Ubu's music. It's what humanizes the band's work. Hardcore Uboids may complain that *Worlds* is too commercial-sounding, and, although inaccessibility for inaccessibility's sake is one of the stupidest byproducts of the avant-garde, they may actually have a point. The cleaning up and smoothing out of Pere Ubu's sound is not so much a sellout (more power to them if they can sell anything), but one of those heart-rending concessions to the realities of adulthood — you know, like rent — that intrude on popular music. (GA)

STEVE LACY & MAL WALDRON Hot House (Novus)

Soprano saxist Steve Lacy is largely known as the man who metaphorically bent the straight horn, but of course he really just bent reality, and the horn happened to be part of reality, so it got bent too. As this recording shows, he also likes simply to play a great tune, and having longtime compatriot/co-expatriate pianist Mal Waldron along makes that easy. The duo picked mostly ironclad near-standards by pianists: Tadd Dameron on the title tune, Bud Powell, Monk, Ellington and the underused Herbie Nichols, plus two by a guy named Waldron and one each by a couple of soprano saxists named Lacy and Bechet. The mood is mostly funny, light, and it's a mark of their own spontaneous composing abilities that you often don't notice where the improvisation starts. My favorites are Ellington's "The Mooche," to which Lacy brings a Jacques Tati kind of mournful comedy, and Nichols' "House Party Starting," which condenses into one riff what New Orleans, Monk and Parker had in common. No brow-knitting, no pretensions, no freak-outs — sure, they'll do all that some other time, and damn well. This is music that breathes. (GB)

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